

A Reflexive Teacher: The Empathic Effect on the Teaching of Telling Chinese Stories Well

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Abstract. The imperative to proficiently convey 'China's story' in English, as mandated by foreign language programs, places heightened demands on students' language skills. Teachers in English public speaking classes, specialized platforms for this purpose, encounter challenges in refining pedagogical approaches. While existing research offers pedagogical suggestions, incorporating direct student feedback is crucial for further refinement. Teachers, understanding the importance of empathy, should optimize their methodologies by integrating reflexivity, drawing on personal experiences to establish rapport. This approach enhances student engagement, cognitive processes, and teaching discourse, contributing to effective narration of China's story through professional skills training and real-life connections to speech topics.

Keywords: reflexivity, English public speaking, telling Chinese stories well, Empathy

1 Introduction

In recent years, China's English education system has shifted its emphasis from traditional reading skills to prioritize English speaking. English speech education focuses on enhancing students' oral expression, encompassing writing, reading, and listening skills. This shift places increased demands on students' overall English proficiency across all educational levels. The growing trend in English public speaking education, highlighted by Lucas [10], is evident through the rise of speech competitions and clubs on and off campus. A growing number of Chinese students actively participate in learning, practicing, and competing in English speech, establishing these programs as a significant avenue to effectively convey Chinese stories [12].

Effectively narrating Chinese stories in English is a pivotal method for aligning foreign language teaching with curriculum ideology and politics. This task requires students to exhibit fluency in English, especially in oral expression, along with a deep understanding of traditional culture, history, and the core values of Chinese culture. Delivering an exceptional Chinese story involves confidently and naturally accomplishing the intercultural communication task by integrating interdisciplinary knowledge [21]. This challenging communication task, demanding both language proficiency and interdisciplinary application, poses difficulties for performers, particularly English language learners. Despite various attempts by teachers and students to enhance the ability to narrate Chinese stories in English, significant challenges persist.

According to Chang [4], current English storytelling often appears overly formalized for effective intercultural communication, a view echoed by Shao [17] who argues that traditional teaching methods no longer meet interdisciplinary demands. In response, teachers must proactively adapt and employ diverse educational strategies tailored to specific situations [21]. Drawing from personal experience, I have observed some teachers relying too heavily on textbooks or professional skills, neglecting student interaction, leading to unsatisfactory performance in storytelling. This paper aims to integrate my experience as a speech trainer with current learning patterns to explore effective methods for training students in narrating Chinese stories in English within the realm of English speech education.

2 Literature review

2.1 English public speaking teaching

The surge in English speech popularity in China's English education has led to studies on effective teaching strategies. Some focus on students, emphasizing the importance of their training and psychological coping skills. Lei [7] highlights the need for students to focus on both verbal expression and interactive engagement with the audience. Thompson et al. [14] emphasize students' mindfulness activities, underlining the role of self-efficacy in maintaining motivation and confidence. Teachers play a crucial role in providing psychological support and organizing engaging activities for effective English speech learning.

Undoubtedly, teachers are essential in successful English speech teaching, prompting extensive research on their approaches and mindset. Li et al. [8] and Casteleyn [3] advocate diverse pedagogical methods, including the use of speech videos and improvisation training, to enhance students' speaking skills. Meanwhile, Tuspekova et al. [15] and Yuan [20] focus on teachers' mindset. The former stresses the necessity for English speech instructors to continuously adjust their mental expectations based on student feedback. The latter contends that English teachers should integrate mindfulness adjustments into their teaching practices to establish their identity as educators through a synergistic approach.

2.2 A Study of Teaching Chinese Storytelling in English from a Speech Perspective

In comprehensive language programs like college English, encompassing listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the challenge of fostering students' adept storytelling about China is evident. Studies by Chang [4] and Shao [17] highlight the struggles faced by instructors in university English courses, some prioritizing textbook content over training students in effective Chinese storytelling. Conversely, others forcefully integrate textbook content with the theme of compelling Chinese storytelling. In these dynamics, students face challenges in enhancing their storytelling skills and developing an interest in the theme.

In English speech classes with clear training objectives, the challenge of cultivating students' proficiency in narrating Chinese stories is evident. Yue [21] recommends an intercultural approach, urging teachers to focus on diverse communicative contexts for enhanced storytelling abilities. Meng [11] proposes a cooperative teacher-student evaluation model, breaking from traditional hierarchies, fostering a cooperative dynamic for improved speech teaching [14].

In my past speech teaching, I have actively incorporated the cross-cultural communication model to foster students' interest in English speech. However, I also believe that teachers, as integral participants, should play a more active role in the teaching process. Combining this with Meng's [11] teacher-student collaborative evaluation approach, I advocate for teachers to enhance their reflexivity. This involves bringing thoughtful and practical perspectives to English speech teaching, particularly in the context of narrating China's story [6].

2.3 The Integration of Reflexive Research and English Language Teaching

Reflexivity, or self-reflection, involves contemplating and integrating thoughts, experiences, and behaviors into real-life contexts. In educational research, scholars like Berger [2] and Consoli [6] advocate for reflexive research, offering a more comprehensive perspective for reflection and analysis, fostering the development of educational practitioners. Previous research explores the use of reflexivity in teacher research. Ahsanu [1] categorizes teachers' self-reflection into three stages, highlighting their contributions to personal development. Wyatt [19] and Consoli [5] advocate for incorporating reflexive research based on Bourdieu's sociological field theory, emphasizing the importance of personal 'stories' in shaping pedagogical philosophies and teaching styles.

Some researchers have explored the relationship between teacher reflexivity and empathy in the integration of reflexivity research with teacher research. For instance, reflexivity is seen as a crucial method for fostering empathy, positively impacting the identity of stakeholders. Xu [17], drawing from Foucault's moral reduction, argues that continuous summarization and reflection on teaching, considering past experiences and the current context, establish a closer connection. This connection significantly influences both the teacher's future teaching and the students' subsequent learning.

3 Methodologies

3.1 Background

Guided by reflexivity and Autoethnography as theoretical frameworks, this study leverages my past experience as an English speech trainer to conduct an in-depth analysis of the teaching process used to train a student, Anna (pseudonym), to proficiently narrate a Chinese story in English. The objective is to explore effective strategies for developing students' proficiency in using English to convey compelling stories about China.

With nearly a decade of experience in English speech, I honed my skills as a student through Toastmasters, mastering fundamental and advanced techniques. As a teacher, I coached over ten students for various speech contests, aiming to comprehend evolving mindsets in speech pedagogy. Despite my rich speaking experience, I've noticed students feeling uneasy with the theme of "telling China's story" in recent years, impacting their performance.

Anna, a sophomore who joined the English Public Speaking Club I organized during her freshman year, possesses a strong foundation in English, scoring over 130 points in the college entrance exam. She demonstrated excellent oral skills during the English Speech Club selection process. Anna's interest in English speech is evident through her active participation in club activities since her freshman year. Despite her success in the audition, securing a place to

represent the club in a speech contest focused on "Telling China's Story," Anna, like many students, had little prior exposure or training on the topic, leading to confusion.

3.2 Data collection

The training with Anna spanned one semester, involving two offline and one online session per week, each lasting approximately an hour. The core of the training centered on Anna preparing and delivering presentations based on topics provided by me, followed by feedback for improvement. This study utilized transcripts and voice recordings from these sessions for analysis. Transcripts included recordings of online interactions, student speeches, and teacher annotations. Voice recordings comprised our online voice communication on WeChat, transcribed and combined with textual recordings for discourse analysis [18]. The data analysis follows a reflexive research methodology, integrating my teaching experiences and Anna's learning experiences to analyze their impact on the teaching, learning process, and final outcomes [5].

4 Data analysis

4.1 Students' Traditional Perceptions of Chinese Storytelling

When assigned the topic "The State of Manners," Anna initially found it challenging, expressing difficulty in finding substantial material beyond Civics books. Her submitted outline for the topic reflected this struggle. It outlined a system where student registration provides access to a library of public speaking videos, with the system recording viewing history. Post-speech, the system automatically tallies instances where students incorporate quotations or imitations from previously viewed videos. These statistics, generated by the teaching software, play a crucial role in analyzing students' listening and speaking abilities within the context of English public speaking training.

What is a State of Etiquette - The Importance of Etiquette - What China as a State of Etiquette Means to the World – Summary

As Chang [4] noted, when addressing the task of telling China's stories, students often produce formal outputs. In Anna's case, formality manifested as a literal understanding of the topic without deeper exploration. In a subsequent conversation, Anna clarified her reasons:

"Just like a high school test, this topic is a noun explanation for me. In fact, I can only think of it as a noun explanation, I can't really think of what it could have to do with me."

I have encountered this mode of thinking frequently in my past lectures, even when I was a student. Faced with broad, so-called "highbrow" topics, I often resorted to a nomenclature approach, similar to Anna's. For instance, during college, I had a speech topic titled "The Meeting between Confucius and Socrates," and my speech outline resembled Anna's—primarily a theoretical account based on nomenclature. However, this approach typically only scratches the surface.

Clearly, an entirely theoretical and explanatory approach falls short of effectively conveying the Chinese story and fails to meet speech requirements. As emphasized earlier, speeches demand not just skills but also an understanding of the audience's perspective, necessitating topics that

resonate with them [9]. To achieve this, speakers must connect the speech content to everyday life, regardless of the topic's breadth. Despite offering suggestions to Anna in this regard, she continued to express confusion, as evident in one of our offline exchanges:

"These lofty topics in fact, I have always learned, but the textbooks and teachers taught me is to explain eh is usually called "shouting slogans"These contents are too far away from our lives."

However, is it genuinely "distant"? In my university speech training, I encountered similarly "lofty" topics, like "Our Future." While distinct from telling China's story well, these topics can be effectively addressed by connecting them to our daily lives. Therefore, guiding students to relate such topics to life has become a teaching challenge.

4.2 The empathic role of teachers in teaching speech by example

Recognizing that merely conveying the methodology to students may not ensure full comprehension [11], I implemented a two-directional training approach with Anna to assist her in effectively addressing the topic related to telling China's story.

In the first phase, I chose several previous speech topics related to telling China's story and tasked Anna with contemplation. After she prepared and delivered her speech, I shared my own past speeches on the same theme and engaged in discussions with her. An excerpt from one such discussion session occurred after completing these steps, focusing on the topic of "Chinese Women's Volleyball Spirit". (T is the teacher and S is the student)

T: Don't just limit yourself to sports, what is the spirit of the women's volleyball team that you have just extracted?

S: Never give up.

T: Very well, you have always experienced something about never giving up in your life. You or your friends and family around you can.

S: Yes, like last semester's exams, a difficult exam but I persevered

T: That's right. Do you have any other experiences in your life besides school that are related to this?

S: This is a bit hard to think of

T: Like the time you went to Southeast Asia to teach during your last vacation.

S: Yes, that's right. I can think of that!

T: Right, linked together.

The above conversation underscores the effectiveness of the teaching method where teachers lead by example, utilizing their own experiences to guide students. This approach not only sparks students' interest but also facilitates a deeper understanding and application of the learned concepts. I encountered a similar scenario in my early speech training, where despite providing ideas, students often required a step-by-step guide, particularly through the use of my personal experiences as a model. This empathetic approach assists students in better grasping the content and enhances their learning experience.

5 Discussion

In this study, Anna's perceptions mirror the common mindset of students with similar backgrounds when confronted with a topic like telling China's story. They often feel unfamiliar and anxious due to prior learning styles. Given that students' mindsets significantly impact learning outcomes, teachers should actively attend to students' affective and cognitive states in the teaching process, going beyond relying solely on textbook content [20]. For educators teaching how to tell Chinese stories in English, surveying students' views and feelings beforehand is crucial to understanding expectations and needs. Teachers should continuously enhance their methods based on student feedback and affective states [16]. Recognizing that teachers' attitudes affect teaching effectiveness [21], regular reflection and adjustment of methods before, during, and after class, drawing on personal experiences with presentations, is essential. This strengthens the teacher-student connection, fostering a collaborative assessment model like Meng's [11], transforming the teacher from a mere instructor to a partner, promoting better understanding and acknowledgment from students [17].

In my training with Anna, using myself as an example and adopting a student's perspective effectively improved her understanding and coping abilities with speech topics related to telling China's story. This underscores the importance of English speech teachers engaging in self-reflection and inversion. Teachers, having been students themselves, possess valuable experiences that should inform daily reflections on teaching practices [19]. As highlighted by Shao [13], teachers often face challenges connecting with students' identities when teaching the topic of telling China's stories. Similar to my experience at the beginning of Anna's training, simply imparting knowledge wasn't transformative until I shifted my mindset to that of a student, driven by reflection on my own speech learning and teaching. Changes in teaching triggered by reflection are more likely to resonate with students, fostering empathy between teacher and student. This reduces distance in relationships, emphasizing equality in education.

6 Conclusion

This study employs reflexivity and autobiographical ethnography to analyze interactions during the teaching of speech aimed at fostering effective China storytelling in English. The findings reveal that, in this teaching context, the instructor can enhance students' English storytelling abilities by leveraging personal reflexive skills, adjusting teaching methods, and employing positive discourse to build empathy. Insights for future teaching and research are offered, emphasizing the importance of teachers actively reflecting on their experiences, adjusting strategies according to student characteristics, and fostering empathy to boost student enthusiasm and efficiency. In research, the study aligns with the integration of reflexive research methodology in teacher education, suggesting that future English speech or education researchers experiment with combining reflexive and autobiographical ethnographic methods to thoroughly investigate their impact on teacher education research [17][6].

A limitation of this study lies in its focus on top students with existing English speaking skills, raising uncertainty about the generalizability of the teaching methods discussed to students with moderate or lower-middle levels of English proficiency. Further research is required to validate the applicability of these methods to a broader range of students.

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